

On Feminism Shedding Its Skin

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Beauty quickens . . . Adrenalizes . . . It makes Life more vivid, animated, living,
worth living - Elaine Scarry

The Feminine Mystique had evaporated, all that was left was the body. - Naomi
Wolf

This paper discusses Post-Feminism, specifically Post-Feminism's construction of a gendered consumer subject. The argument rests on the assumptions that Feminism is chiefly political in that it addresses the suppression/essentialization of women in patriarchal discourse which at the same time articulating the differences between women that women have begun to take into account. As this paper will show, the gendered consumer subject that Post-Feminism addresses is several steps away from the political identity and cultural construction that Feminism speaks for. Post-Feminism by being 'post' of 'Feminism' does not imply a critique of the main tenets of Feminism as much as it implies a re-evaluation of what Feminism may now include. The plurality that we ascribe to Feminism (like Black Feminism, Third World Feminism, Material Feminism, Marxist Feminism and the proliferation goes on) does not mean that Feminism's frontiers have corroded away or that Feminism is *passé*. Feminism or rather Feminisms are still valid as narratives, the 'post' prefix added now to Feminism is not a sign of dissension but the prefix speaks of a new arena of experience that Feminism is or Feminisms are encountering. Post-Feminism in other words, is not despairing of what Feminism has or what Feminisms have become nor is it repudiating what Feminisms have achieved. The 'post' prefix is a site of contemplation and re-alignment. It is not to be read as a site of disengagement.

In this paper, I look at Post-Feminism as part of the interrogations and expansions, the plurality that Feminisms are accommodating within its arena or

discourse. In these terms, Post-feminism is a stance, not a narrative of contestation. It is a shedding of skin in the body of Feminism. In the course of this paper I also show that Post-Feminisms' values or propensities are not altogether 'new' – but these have surfaced at other points in time as well. Even as far back as 1920s, educated, professional women were talking about a Post-Feminist stance, trying to combine tradition with enlightenment and freedom. I also refer to Post-Feminism rather than Postfeminism, commonly used by most theoreticians. The hyphen and the capitalization of Feminism in Post-Feminism connote the emphasis of authority that is missing in the construction of Postfeminism.

In *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (2001) Sarah Gamble refers to the growth of Postfeminism. Texts like Tania Modleski's *Feminism without Women: Culture without Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (1991) and Imelda Whelehan's *Feminist Thought, From the Second Wave to Post-feminism* (1995) were outlining the contours Postfeminism was taking. Theorists, Gamble opines, were positing Postfeminism as a liberal ideology that performed broadly within a flexible, easy-going, enlightened modernity. Gamble also points to the wide-ranging debates taking place around this subject with the publication of Susan Faludi's 'Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women' (1981), Katie Rophie's 'The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism' (1993), Rene Denfeld's 'The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order' (1995), Deborah Seigel's 'Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography and a "Postfeminist" movement and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990).

I posit that Post-Feminism appeals to and includes educated, professional (privileged) women, who have gained from educational and professional opportunities and are now looking for "an aesthetic individual freedom" (Honneth, qtd. in Dunn 173). Such aesthetic personal freedom is anchored in a culture of consumption and leisure. It articulates new forms of physical and sexual empowerment: leisure, beauty, fitness, style and consumer-image. Such forms of experience are making sites for the production of a Post-Feminist Self. It is perplexing to practitioners of Feminism that the subversive energy that Feminism signified is being 'pretty-fied' and there has been a debilitating move from political self-actualization to a personal aesthetic. Feminism seems to have been so far the

narrative of what most 'real women' faced. Post-Feminism addresses a gap in this unifying agenda. Some women were just not wrestling for their rights to be treated as equals or different – they had already achieved such rights and empowerment and now wished to create their own faces rather than submit to the faceless universal signification that Feminism had made available. The 'personal freedom' implicit in Post-Feminism is not a betrayal of Feminism's manifest project. It is merely a new way of being political and personal without being disfigured by trench-mentality or militant advocacy. The Post-Feminist seeking personal aesthetic freedom, is aware and respectful that 'not all women' have gained the same fruits she enjoys – however, she will wish to point out that she is also 'real woman', no matter how hard some Feminists try to suggest that real women do not care about aesthetic freedoms or empowerment through the use of their charge cards. The Post-Feminist is aware that her privileges are hard-earned and well-deserved. She imagines her success will 'appeal' to and will pave way for others to try and win similar privileges, not merely through affirmative action or subversive politics but by using a Post-Feminist persuasion.

Post-Feminism started appearing in media around the 1980s and it became usable as a concept from 1990s. This formulation hinges on Nietzsche-inspired images of self-creation and is based on an aesthetic concept of freedom. There is some irony in this as Nietzsche has been considered a misogynist and he has offended Feminists with his ideas on the subjectivity of women. However, it is being pointed out now that the dialogue between Nietzsche and Feminists need to be re-scrutinized. It appears that Nietzsche had approached the man/woman and master/slave dualism in a way that might be useful instead of being offensive for Feminists. Lynne Tirrell for example, points out in "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation, On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Nietzsche for Feminists" that Nietzsche had shown that what mattered most, which is, to quote Tirrell: "taking responsibility for one's values and taking action to reshape the world accordingly" (174-75). Tirrell also quotes from Marilyn Frye "once women have more control, the need to say no to what is now a threat will diminish and our having gained control will result in and be the result of our being, pleasing active beings with momentum of our own, with sufficient shape and structure – with

sufficient integrity to generate friction” (qtd. in Tirrell 175). Post-Feminism’s self-generation subscribes to the Nietzschean code of assuming responsibility.

Having said that, there is no absolute consensus on what Post-Feminism actually constitutes. Some critics have wryly observed that instead of relying on Gynocriticism inaugurated by Elaine Showlater, some Post-Feminists have moved away into Gymocentricism. The shift from Gynocriticism to Gymocriticism, is not as reactionary as it may appear. For the Post-Feminist ‘self-creation’ offers possibilities that Feminism too had espoused, all that Post-Feminism does is take this possibility and attaches to it a new skin. The new skin transplanted on the body of Feminism is healthy and lean. The unhealthy excesses of dualism have been shed off and the leaner look that Post-Feminism carries is a proof of the “momentum”, the “shape and structure” (Frye, qtd. in Tirrell 175) that Feminism has passed on to a newer generation of women.

Who are Post-Feminists? This essay tries to locate the Post-Feminist as a gendered consumer subject not necessarily a zealot hungry for a cause. If the constituency of Feminism was created by identifying oppression and posting difference, there is no Post-Feminist constituency in that sense. There is no rallying call or theoretical episteme. The Post-Feminist creates an identity around images, advertisements, desires produced by consumerism. The Post-Feminist is constantly finding a rationale for her being – in new thrills and artifacts, in expressions of style and experience of leisure. Feminists might want to point out that consumerism obliterates rather than safeguards personal freedom. Feminists assert Post-Feminists are deluding themselves that personal freedom and consumerism have any political consequence. Post-Feminism feels that “Feminism is not about ‘Real’ women, only about political subjects” (Saunders 14).

For Post-Feminism, ‘consumption’ by itself is not a way of forging identity, the ‘freedom’ it entails for women is how the self is generated. Consumption or Gymociticism is not a movement nor is it apolitical. It is merely an expression of choice. Cultural, political, social differences are not set aside by merely using some brands, services and products – these are just re-positioned. By prescribing to Post-Feminism’s endorsement of beauty, empowerment, fitness or well-being – an Arab

woman, a Jewish woman, someone from Somalia or Dhaka or Connecticut can afford to restate themselves and re-position their differences.

The argument seems to be that Post-Feminism affords a new space of identification for women and between women. Post-Feminists are looking at Super-malls with new interest. Malls are about acres and acres of shopping space, it is a consumer heaven – all about style and luxury, about choices and pleasure, stimulating seductive and aesthetic experience and economy. Malls are about gratification of the body. Post-Feminism is not endorsing mindless retail experience or making a pulpit out of the beauty salon. It is rather pointing to a stimulating array of choice that implies freedom instead of inhibition. Post-Feminism does not lose the subversive energy that Feminism has. It just loses its inhibition. Self-creation, as the Post-Feminist will attest, is affirming – being ‘Other’ is not.

The aesthetics that Post-Feminism represents is consistent with its attitudes. Post-Feminists are demanding and non-apologetic about the choices they make. For Post-Feminists, the credentials of Feminism have not been rendered irrelevant. Post-Feminism has merely re-appropriated its energy. A Post-Feminist is not resistant to ideals, she merely winces at being objectified by those ideals. Take for example, the L’Oreal advertisement. In an advertisement on hair colouring products, Aishwariya Ray says, “When it comes to hair colour, I am very demanding”. At the end of the advertisement, she says she is “worth” it. Images of beauty, body and the sense of empowerment women are wielding create a potent message of Post-Feministic persuasion. These women are not mute or passive receivers of products and culture of consumption, rather they are structuring their desires into a site from where they can be constitutive instead of exploited agencies.

A reference could also be made to a feature article ‘Million Dollar Mom’ by Priyanka Gehlot Solanki and Amrita Mulchandani published on the occasion of Mother’s Day in a local newspaper in *Baroda Times of India* on 11 May, 2008. The entire article steers clear of family bonds or emotional quotients and concentrates on women needing to keep shape and stay healthy (Appendix). So what is emerging is an equation between looking good and feeling good about one’s self. This investment in the body/beauty/fitness may be part of the ‘aesthetic personal

freedom' but Feminism will claim that Post-Feminism does ride on the back of the hard and unglamorous work that Feminism has painstakingly done over the years.

Despite its protestations, Post-Feminism may seem like an adulterated version of what Feminism was, it does seem like Post-Feminism has cut itself adrift from everything Feminism held sacred. Post-Feminism may or may not be worried about the expiry of Feminism, the fact is without the changes brought on by Feminism, Post-Feminism would not be able to articulate, let alone justify its presence. Having said that, Post-Feminism's construction of the gendered consumer subject has created atrophy and it does not just have small irksome consequences. In 1991, Naomi Wolf in her celebrated bestseller *The Beauty Myth* exposed the 'beauty myth' was controlling and undermining women by turning women into victims of male institutions or corporates of power. The basic premise of *The Beauty Myth* is that forced adherence to standards of physical beauty has grown stronger for women as they gained power in other societal arenas. In the book, Wolf argued that beauty as a normative value is entirely socially constructed, and that patriarchy determines the content of that construction with the goal of reproducing its own hegemony.

In *The Beauty Myth* she writes:

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us . . . [D]uring the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing specialty . . . [P]ornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal . . . More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our un-liberated grandmothers. (Wolf 10)

Wolf also posited the danger women falling or becoming entrapped into fixed (and unrealistic) notions of beauty that they can neither conform to nor ignore. Wolf points to how devastatingly the beauty myth serves women. The myth

infiltrates how women construct themselves and what they expect others to see in them. The circulation of images of a fixed model of beauty, fitness and vitality is so pervasive that women are not just climbing social ladders and corporate hierarchies – they are filing their nails while at it. Wolf describes the disturbing effect of the beauty myth: it undermines women psychologically and politically by taking on the tone of an ideology.

Wolf was critiquing the beauty myth in terms of feminist paradigms and by pointing out to statistics. The diet industry, Wolf writes, was netting \$33 billion, the cosmetic industry \$20 billion and cosmetic surgery \$ 300 million per year. Wolf suggests that by subscribing to the beauty myth women were subscribing to certain behaviour that relates to a “commercial” aspect of beauty which women have no role in. Wolf’s book had succeeded in touching a nerve. It was enlightening in a Feminist mode. Germaine Greer and other second generation Feminists were endorsing Wolf’s critique of successful women who were found to be corporealizing the beauty myth. Her work was successful in bringing to the fore issues that demanded a new wave of Feminist consciousness.

Post-Feminists however, wanted to argue that the behaviour women are subscribing to is not as totalizing as Feminists were making it out to be. They wished to posit that this behaviour is empowering instead of being degrading, it entails an active role than a passive one, it is informed rather than enforced. One has to see that the value-system the malls, billboards, campaign trailers, TV shows and popular media creates is not about reinforcing the “feminine mystique” Wolf accusingly points to. Rather, these value-systems are embraced by women professionals who have climbed the rungs of the social ladder, have responsible portfolios and earn hefty pay cheques. When these women wish to buy face creams and go to nail salons and day-spas and have their body surgically enhanced – they are subscribing to a need and a desire that Feminism has not previously given much attention to. Post-Feminism regards such consumerism and aesthetic personal freedom as a break through as much as it is a break away.

So, it is possible to say at this juncture that Post-Feminism creates a new set of assumptions. Not all of these assumptions sit well with Feminism. Some

assumptions seem to even be rolling back the accomplishments of Feminism. For example, upholding the 'personal' in place of 'the political' undermines Feminism's choicest project. bell hooks was to triumphantly declare: "Feminism is for everybody" (qtd. in Tasker and Negra 2). Is Post-Feminism for everybody? Feminists would say that Post-Feminism is not about everyone. In contestation, a Post-Feminist would say Post-Feminism is about a different form of inclusion. It is not a cult. It is in sync with Postmodern aesthetics and the New Economy. Post-Feminism, may seem to critics, adheres to a single standard of beauty, it places increased emphasis on retail pleasure and a luxurious life-style. Post-Feminism may seem complicit with the capitalist discourse.

Betty Friedan had said about the culture of women of the 1950s: "there is no way for a woman to be a heroine than to 'keep on having babies'" (qtd. in Wolf 67) – Wolf adds that there is no way today for a woman to be a heroine other than to "keep on looking beautiful" (Wolf 67). Despite the criticisms leveled against Post-Feminism by post-Friedan critics, Post-Feminism has had certain indubitable effects on women.

- women can become guilt-free consumers,
- women are freed from the reductive beauty myth
- women are free to disengage from Feminism's stark politics
- women are no longer passive about physical appearance, success or consumption
- women can celebrate, choose, differentiate and enjoy
- difference between women is neither ignored nor politicized
- women have a way to be a feminist without looking like one
- most importantly, Post-Feminists have been able "to mainstream" Feminist ideas

In other words, Post-Feminism has been able to configure a new alignment. It contests that female consumers are experiencing a new freedom that is empowering and therapeutic. Post-Feminism's gaze is on evolution and transformation but not in the way Feminism sees it. Post-Feminism fetishizes youth, the girl to be exact. Girlhood offers a respite from the other more uncomfortable/difficult areas of

experience. The Post-Feminism girl is young, middle-aged or beyond. Post-Feminism is careful about not reverting to psychoanalytic constructions of the girl-child as someone who represents 'lack' and 'self-divisions'. Rather, in Post-Feminism, the girl represents "fantasies of transformation" (Tasker and Negra 22), she desires and hence becomes the consumer, the subject and object of her own fantasy and freedom.

In this connection, I will refer to a British TV sitcom, "Absolutely Fabulous" (1992) in which Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley star. They make a hilariously dysfunctional middle-aged pair. Both them are heavily made up, they boisterously drink and chain-smoke their way to state who they are by defying their age, by overplaying how eccentric they look and sound, in their adolescent 'modern' ways. In contrast, Saffron, the daughter of Edwina is a staid, serious young woman who is a stickler for Feminist sense and propriety. She is the helplessly ineffective 'normal' one in a chaotic household. What this provides is a great collision between a morbidly serious Feminist trajectory (that Saffron posits) and an endearingly irresponsible adolescent hyper-reality (that the older women preside over). The TV drama is a commentary on the dysfunctionalities and insecurities that are beginning to break out between Feminist and Post-Feminist agencies.

With its 'very personal' agenda, with flirtatious transactions with capitalist and male institutions of power – Post-Feminism exposes Feminism's limitations and explores or tests its own boundaries and possibilities. What I wish to suggest here however, is that Post-Feminism is not as self-contained as it would imagine itself to be. Frederic Jameson has posited how even "organized oppositional activity and consciousness can be possible under the co-opting nature of the so-called Postmodern cultural condition" (qtd. in Lewis and Mill 76).

Therefore, Post-Feminism has merely once again reminded Feminism that women are not "an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradiction" (Mills and Sen 106). Post-Feminism destabilizes Feminism's universalizing agenda and encourages the gendered consumer subject to choose, exercise, function in an autonomous way. "Post-Feminism represents a Kantian consciousness of being vigilant against one's

own exploitation and demand that value is given to one's interests and one's own person" (Cudd and Anderson 298). Post-Feminism draws inspiration from liberal Feminism and enlightened plurality – even though it may seem like an outrageous assault on the history of feminist struggle. So Post-Feminism may look like a backlash to some. To others it will look like a necessary reconstitution of the original aim. According to Gamble Post-Feminism merely provides an epistemology that is used to disrupt what Gamble terms as universalizing patterns of thought. Gamble suggests Post-Feminism has made itself capable of aligning with Post-modernism, Post-Structuralism and Post-colonialism.

For women to move away from Feminism, to find a voice in disagreement with or resistance to Feminism is not particularly new. Unease with Feminism's assumptions was cropping up back in the 1920s and 1930s, surprisingly when "the social results of the first Feminist wave were being realized" (Cott 202). Then as now there was a roll-back, particularly among professional women against Feminist positions regarding gender difference. "We're interested in people now – not man or women", declared a Greenwich Village female literary group proclaiming itself in 1919 somewhat problematically as Postfeminist (Cott 202). This breed of New Woman in the 1920s was regarded as a glamourized being. What the New Woman contested was the assumption that woman was an already constituted category without any differences. "They are woman not women", wrote Lata Hollingworth (qtd. in Cott 277).

Even in India, Geraldine Forbes shows in *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine and Histriography* that the All India Women's Conference of 1927 rejected the term 'feminist' as it put women's rights before the national cause. It also felt that Feminism was responsible for making the man look like the 'enemy' when they felt that 'customs' were the enemy (customs were the result of wars, invasions and imperialism) (Forbes 17). Their ideology of women's rights gained sustenance not from 'Feminism' but from the "'Golden Age' when women were in India free to participate in political and social affairs. They were presented an enlarged sphere to play a role in – the nation. So that they could use their womanly talents to improve the world" (Forbes 18). Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) who was

classified as the “New Woman” was expected to be in touch with the roots and be like the spiritual heroines of the ancient epics (Forbes 18).

For the present day Post-Feminist, beauty pageant contestants are like “warrior bodies” and “athlete bodies” representing the nation in the world of nations in ways which are not different from “soldiers and cricketers” (Mills and Sen 10). The body of the New Indian Women depicts “a set of real relationships between body, society, nation and globe that are marked by dominance without hegemony” (Mills and Sen 11). New Indian women like their ancestors are modernizing themselves while being rooted to a Vedic tradition: of yoga, mantras and meditations as well as gyms and aerobics and cosmetic clinics. The sense of Tradition that is required to be conjoined with the personal aesthetic freedom puts a complex veneer on the Post-Feminist stance. Unlike the Feminist, the Post-Feminist is not cynical about traditions and customs. Nor is the Post-Feminist an anti-Feminist as she values the social results that Feminism has produced.

In conclusion, what makes Post-Feminism something worth taking seriously? This could be seen as a deconstructive enterprise in the Derridean mode. The “post” can usefully underscore the importance of the past in the shaping of the possibilities of the present and future (modified from Frederick Cooper 19). Post-Feminism also seems aligned to Braudrillard’s principle of seduction which sees everything as seduction - the process of seduction endlessly defers the discourse. Many critics of Post-Feminism have found themselves pointing out that Post-Feminism does not disclose itself, it merely keeps on happening. Gamble points us to *Illusions of Post-Feminism* (1995) which posits that Post-Feminism has never been defined - it remains “an assumption” (Gamble 43). Another score on which Post-Feminism is often criticized is the question of its ethics. Post-Feminism is not unethical, it remains committed to the idea of ‘freedom’ and the possibility of ‘self-creation’ beyond the posture of dualism. Post-Feminism is therefore, not shrinking away from Feminism. Rather, Post-Feminism is a way in which Feminism is coming to “understand itself” (qtd. in Dunn 83). And that gives it reason to be.

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Appendix

Million-dollar MOM

37 captures the essence of motherhood in an age where the demands are many and daunting

MOM IS A HAPPY WORD!
Raavi More with daughter Zaahi

PRIYANKA GEHLOT SOLANKI AND AMRITA MULCHANDANI
Times loves homework.

Mothers have had a long journey. They are the warriors who protect their home and hearth with a love that can be fierce and comforting at the same time. And while mothers in 2008 continue to take a cue from generations of mothers and nurture and nourish us, they are also doing more. They tend to the home and their hobbies. They nurture children and careers with élan. They take care that the baby bump post-pregnancy is handled with exercise, style and a *joie de vivre*. How do they do it all? Raavi More, who is the perfect better half to crick-

eter Kiran More and mother to two lovely girls — Zaahi, 13 and Ruhi, 18 says, "I follow the rule: eat healthy, exercise and be happy. I was a very young mother and I had chosen to be home and take care of my daughters as Kiran had a very busy schedule. I found time to do everything that mattered to me and today I am on the verge of releasing my music album. The key lies in prioritising and planning."

Actress Perizaad Zorabian Irani talks from her own experience. "Being a mother is about a new beginning, not the end of looking good or gorgeous. I am a mother and have got back to

shape, and it feels great when I get astonished looks and questions like 'Are you a mother?'"

Shaila Shah, a trainer and owner of a popular gym echoes a similar point of view. "Women are getting more aware of how they look and how to work on their body. Today it is not unusual to find mothers and daughters coming to the gym together or daughters-in-law walking in with their mothers-in-laws."

What's encouraging is the fact that even children want their mummies to look and feel better. "Kids want their mothers to visit a parlour regularly and be well groomed and presentable," says

Rajika Kacheria, a cosmetologist. Fashion designer Rohit Verma feels that women today are doing good job of looking after their families as well as themselves. "I see a positive trend in Indian women participating in fashion contests, especially the ones which are for married women. In a sense they are also inspired by their counterparts in Europe and the US where women are fanatic about fitness and fashion." Theatre personality Dolly Thakore says, "Times are changing and being fit also helps in being happy. There's no age limit when it comes to being youthful and trendy"

If there can ever be a synonym to mother, can we attempt that with 'perfection'?